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Initiating Sustained Silent Reading

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*"I abhor recipes; they prescribe exactly what to do. Yet, chefs follow recipes and I am glad they do. I abhor rigid teaching plans, yet if I want all pupils to read books I know this recipe works."*

## Initiating Sustained Silent Reading

ROBERT A. MC CRACKEN

A SIMPLE OBJECTIVE of any school's reading program is to develop each student's ability to read silently without interruption for a relatively long period of time. Dr. Lyman C. Hunt, Jr. of the University of Vermont designated such a goal as early as 1960 and soon thereafter introduced *Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading* with the acronym USSR. The acronym was to command attention; we found it commanded too much attention so we dropped the U and SSR evolved. Initially, the sustaining power was thought to be a goal reached through months or years of practice. We discovered that the goal can be reached almost instantly if SSR is viewed as a complement of a teaching program. Since SSR takes school time, it supplants some part of each student's existing school program. It may supplant part of a student's reading program, but it is more effective when it becomes a part of each teacher's program. SSR is the *drill* of silent reading; it is the drill or practice necessary in learning to read, not a total reading program. SSR requires no special machines or materials other than a timer; it requires no special teacher training or expertise.

To initiate SSR the teacher follows six rules rigidly. Establishing the habit may take a few days, or three or four months if the class is peculiarly reluctant. We find that varying from these rules when starting may cause SSR to founder and fail.

1. *Each student must read silently.* The implication of this rule is that the teacher believes that each student can read silently so that no student dares pretend he cannot. The teacher may state an *or else*, to convince the reluctant readers that reading

is the lesser of two evils and to convince all students that the teacher is very serious about the business of silent reading.

2. *The teacher reads*, and permits no interruption of his reading. He reads adult fare in which he can become engrossed. The teacher must set an example. Many students have never known an adult to read a book.
3. *Each student selects a single book* (or magazine or newspaper). No book changing is permitted. There must be a wide range of materials available. No student, able or remedial, should be chided for reading an easy book. The teacher has books or magazines available for the student who says he has forgotten. For the student who is reluctant to choose, the teacher may select the book, require what is to be read, and give the student questions to answer for homework. The next day he will have chosen his own book.
4. *A timer is used*. An alarm clock or cooking timer is placed so that no one knows how much time has elapsed. A wall clock will not work; the reluctant readers become clock watchers. Nor can the teacher act as the timer; students will interrupt to ask if time is up. Start with five to ten minutes. When the timer rings, the teacher says, "Good. You sustained your reading today for ten minutes (or whatever). Continue reading silently if you wish." Most of the class will choose to continue and they will maintain their attention for twenty to fifty minutes more. The teacher notes their sustaining power and sets the timer forward the next day so that it almost reaches the sustained reading time of the first student who quit.
5. *There are absolutely no reports or records of any kind*. Students do not even keep a list of books they read. Book discussions, writing, and record keeping flow naturally as sustained silent reading becomes a habit, but nothing is required initially or the reluctant readers do not participate.
6. *Begin with whole classes or larger groups of students* heterogeneously grouped. Groups of ten or fewer sometimes can't get started because the students feel free to comment or to ask for help. Large groups, ninety to one hundred students, in an open area, with two or more teachers participating, have begun with no difficulty.

Who initiates and maintains the sustained silent reading time? We have worked with individual teachers and school staffs in developing SSR. There is no single answer other than a commitment by a teacher or staff to the concept that practice and example are both necessary parts of any teaching program. Frequently, an English teacher, the core teacher in a junior high, or the reading teacher initiates SSR in his own program without enlisting any other teachers. The success of SSR by one teacher frequently recruits other teachers.

A single teacher, sometimes a paraprofessional, is assigned to a reading room and classes of students go to the SSR room daily, biweekly or weekly. The reading rooms sponsored by Dr. Floyd Davis in the Seattle, Washington Schools are an example of this, although we claim no credit for inspiring them.

If a secondary school staff agrees to initiate SSR, each student may have SSR on Monday in math class, on Tuesday in social studies, on Wednesday in English, on Thursday in foreign language, and on Friday in science. This arrangement can result in a teacher having to read for five consecutive periods. A better arrangement is for SSR to be first period on Monday, second on Tuesday, etc. One variation which has proved to be successful has been for each teacher to require the reading to be from material related to his subject. One industrial arts teacher reported success with motor magazines, manuals, *Popular Mechanics*, and the like. Many social studies teachers report success with historical novels, biographies, contemporary affairs non-fiction and news magazines. Science fiction is popular within the science class along with biographies of discovery. Of course, this requirement of curriculum-relatedness creates a special problem of securing materials, but this is not an unreasonable expectation for a professional in his own field.

Our experience suggests that most classes (90 percent or more) will sustain silent reading for twenty-five minutes or more within one week's time if there are daily sessions. Classes usually need a month of reading under the six rules before the teacher can instigate variations from the six rules. Classes grouped homogeneously as poor readers may require three or four months. The failure of the teacher to set an example by reading silently invites students to quit reading, no matter how well the SSR habit seems to be established. A reading teacher who has five or six classes a day may read with each class only once a week; however, the classes know that the teacher is reading every day.

Many teachers have asked how we know that students are reading if they select their own materials and we require no reaction. We have many evidences. The simplest is a logical inference. You

observe thirty-five students, age 14 to 15, sitting with open books or magazines, each turning pages regularly. They manifest this behavior for thirty minutes without a word being spoken in the room, with only two students stretching and looking around the room for five to ten seconds. They do this for five consecutive days. These students have to be responding to the content in meaningful ways. Threat alone cannot maintain such behavior, nor will students fake reading in order to avoid working.

Secondly, students want to talk about the books they read, and unless the teacher prevents it, will do so spontaneously. Then it becomes obvious that they have read. Most students want credit for what they do and when given the opportunity to respond they do so. They have even written traditional book reports voluntarily when no other ways of responding were available.

Thirdly, students request that SSR be extended when time is called after 30 minutes. We find rarely a single objector to continuing. They inquire each day as the period begins, "Are we going to have SSR today?"

By the second week, the teacher is ready to encourage responses. He may begin by setting examples following SSR. Thus he comments about his book, and students respond in kind. The teacher may:

1. summarize in one sentence the main idea of a book;
2. read a paragraph from his book and relate it to current happenings, national political events, or something in school;
3. use the dictionary to check a word, comment about its unusual usage, or remark that it is a word he cannot recall ever seeing before;
4. have the pupils question him about his book and develop models of questioning so that students learn how to go beyond simple recall;
5. describe how some episodes in the book have suggested ideas or given him possible insight into how to teach or work with students;
6. begin to keep a journal of interesting words, ideas, epithets, etc.;
7. list the books he reads or the pages read daily.

We have seen all of these evoke like student responses, which convince us that the students are reading meaningfully.

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### What Is the Next Step?

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between what my children are doing and what reading is is still great, but I would have been able to learn or to accomplish far less if I had been in a school that did not care so much about its students that it placed all it had in knowledge and materials in my hands.

Yet my junior high school cannot, by itself, solve the reading problem, not even that part of it housed within its walls. No one school, no one system, no one state can cure this national malady. Until a national commitment to reading is funded and curriculum reform is accomplished, the right to read of these and who knows how many thousand other children like them will continue to be denied each year. And their right to read cannot safely be denied any longer.



### Initiating Sustained Silent Reading

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We have asked thousands of students after six or more months of SSR if they like it and why. They respond unanimously that they like it. They give a great number of reasons why. Four reasons predominate. First, students say they like SSR because it is quiet, with many indicating it is the only quiet time in their entire day. All kinds of students have responded that they learned to like to read. We are not surprised at this response from the reluctant reader, but it seems significant that many able readers say this. Poor readers respond that since no one watches them they can make mistakes without worrying. Able readers say that they are relieved because they don't have to prove that they are bright every time they read something. All respond that they like SSR because they can read what they want to read.

Each student should learn to read silently and to sustain the act of reading in books for reasonably long periods of time. Each student can learn this from adult example and through teaching complemented by practice. Each student in kindergarten through high school should be required to read silently, without interruption, for thirty minutes a day. He must have sufficient practice

to benefit from his teaching, and he must drill himself until he becomes proficient.

In our press for achievement, the importance of practice in reading silently has been overlooked. Our students are overtaught and under-practiced. We behave as if we expect students to read freely at home for practice. We behave as if there is so much to teach that school time cannot be wasted on drill, at least not on silent reading drill. If something is read, we must check comprehension, see that it is read properly, and give credit. Sometimes we even equate the filling in of blanks with reading.

We have reports from hundreds of classrooms with all sorts of pupil populations. We have testimonials from English teachers, machine shop teachers, teachers of the mentally retarded of all ages, teachers of young adults in federal penitentiaries, secondary school reading specialists, and teachers of academic subjects. They report unanimously that SSR works and that it worked almost instantaneously once it was initiated.



## Black Studies and Paraprofessionals

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